



## Iran: Release of Scholar Welcomed but Other Releases Still Urged

### PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release – 24 August 2007

**ARTICLE 19, Index on Censorship and English PEN welcome the release on conditional bail of Dr Haleh Esfandiari and call for the immediate release of Dr. Kian Tajbakhsh and Mr Ali Shakeri.**

We welcome the unexpected release of Dr Haleh Esfandiari on conditional bail from Tehran's Evin prison on Tuesday 22 August. Dr Esfandiari has spent months behind bars on the highly speculative charge of 'acting against security by engaging in propaganda against the Islamic republic by methods of spying on behalf of foreigners'. She has been released on bail of 3 billion rials (about US\$333,000).

Dr Esfandiari is the Director of the Middle East programme at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in the United States and is an Iranian-US citizen. She recently traveled to Iran to visit her ailing 93-year-old mother in Tehran. In December 2006, she was robbed at knifepoint and her travel documents taken. She was then refused permission to leave the country and subjected to lengthy interrogations (up to 8 hours per day) by the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence until mid-February. On 7 May, Dr Esfandiari was told to report to the Ministry of Intelligence and was held in custody at Evin Prison until 22 August.

While we greatly welcome the conditional release of Dr Esfandiari, we are deeply concerned by the ongoing detention of two other Iranian-US citizens on similarly speculative national security charges: Dr Kian Tajbakhsh, a consultant with the Soros Foundation's Open Society Institute and Ali Shakeri, a founding board member of the Center for Citizen Peace building at the University of California, Irvine. Both have also been held in custody since early May 2007 at Evin Prison in Tehran.

We urgently call upon the Iranian authorities to also release Dr Kian Tajbakhsh and Mr Ali Shakeri. As outlined below, both of these individuals are involved in important peace building and development work and the Iranian authorities have not produced any evidence of their activities posing a threat to the national security of Iran

Furthermore, we call upon the Iranian government to drop all charges against Dr Esfandiari and to allow her to leave Iran and return to the United States and her family.

### **Background**

Dr Kian Tajbakhsh is an internationally-respected Iranian-American scholar, social scientist and urban planner. From 1994 until 2001, Dr Tajbakhsh taught Urban Policy and Politics at the New School for Social Research in New York City. Dr Tajbakhsh is also an international expert in the areas of local government reform, urban planning, public health, and social policy. He has acted as a consultant for several Iranian government organisations, including the Municipalities Organisation, the Social Security Organisation, and the Ministry of the Interior, and with international nongovernmental organisations such as the World Bank, the Open Society Institute, and the Netherlands Association of Municipalities. His work in Iran has included evaluating humanitarian relief and rebuilding projects in the aftermath of the devastating 2003 earthquake in Bam. In 2006, he completed a three-year study of the local government sector in Iran. Dr Kian Tajbakhsh was arrested at his home in Tehran on 11 May 2007 and is being held at Evin Prison in Tehran.

Dr Haleh Esfandiari was robbed at knifepoint on 30 December 2006 by three men while on the way to the airport after visiting her ailing 93-year-old mother in Tehran, whom she had visited approximately twice a year over the past decade. During this incident, the men threatened to kill her; then they stole her baggage and both her US and Iranian passports. Consequently, she was not permitted to leave the country. When she applied for new travel documents, she was instead barred from leaving Iran and interrogated for up to eight hours a day over a period of several weeks (until February 14) by authorities from the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence. On 7 May 2007, she was told to report to the Ministry of Intelligence. Upon her arrival there on the morning of 8 May she was taken into custody and driven to Tehran's Evin Prison where she has been held in custody ever since.

Mr Ali Shakeri is a businessman in Irvine, California with Global Estate Funding, having graduated from the University of Texas with a business administration degree. He is an Iranian-American peace activist who serves on the Community Advisory Board of the Center for Citizen Peace building at the University of California, Irvine. He went to Iran to visit his mother, who was ill and died during his visit. He is believed to have been detained since 8 May 2007. After several weeks denying Shakeri's detention, the Iranian authorities have finally admitted that he was under their custody.

### **NOTES TO EDITORS**

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